

## CORNELIUS VANDERBILT.

*By William S. Bridgman.*

SEVENTY five years ago the earthly property of the house of Vanderbilt consisted of a sandy farm on Staten Island, and a sail boat that plied up and down New York Harbor. These modest possessions have since grown until they now form the immense estate which, held together as a sort of family trust by the sons of the late William H. Vanderbilt, runs far into the hundreds of millions of dollars. The entire previous history of the world cannot show a parallel to this financial romance of nineteenth century America. The gathered treasures of the Lydian Croesus and the Roman Crassus would sink into insignificance beside the bond laden safes of the Vanderbilts, and Midas, whose magic touch turned stones into gold, was, in comparison with these latter day rivals, a mere plodding novice in the art of multiplying riches.

It is not enough to cite, as the cause of this marvelous accumulation of wealth, the wonderful abilities and remarkable good luck of its founder, the "Commodore." Difficult as it is to make a great fortune, it has often been proved that it is a still rarer achievement to increase one inherited from its maker. And so vast have been the additions to the estate left by the first millionaire Vanderbilt, that his bequests, great as they were, have become overshadowed by the acquisitions of his son and grandsons. The late William H. Vanderbilt made twice as many millions in seven years as did the Commodore in the whole course of his long career of business and speculation. The former's sons are adding to the family "pile" at a rate which though less sensational is still rapid, and of necessity gathers momentum as the "pile" and its power

of earning interest become greater. Miserliness is one of the last faults of which they could be accused, but there is no doubt that their expenditures, ample as they are, amount to but a comparatively small share of the revenue that rolls in from their colossal investments.

"To what extent is public discussion of the private affairs of individuals legitimate?" has become a question of contemporary interest and importance. The ultra inquisitiveness of the daily press has produced a feeling of revulsion against the excesses in this direction of which the "personal journalism" of the day must plead guilty. Attempts have even been made to restrain the progress of modern intrusiveness by means of the law, as being an invasion of the constitutional privileges of the citizen. Whether such a right can be established by writ or injunction is doubtful. But if a man cannot invoke the courts to keep the details of his private life from the wagging tongues of a tattling public, yet a gentleman, among gentlemen, will find his right to individual privacy universally recognized. It is not our purpose to pry into the personal affairs of a family that enjoys the respect of all its fellow citizens, with the possible exception of a few wild eyed socialists to whom the word "millionaire" is as a red rag to an ill tempered bull. But as the mention of political leaders is inseparable from an intelligent discussion of national affairs, so also is it legitimate and proper to discuss the growth of a vast fortune that has become a part of the history of modern finance, and to canvass the tremendous possibilities involved in its possession. The possessors themselves would readily admit that in the control of these possibilities they are, in a cer-

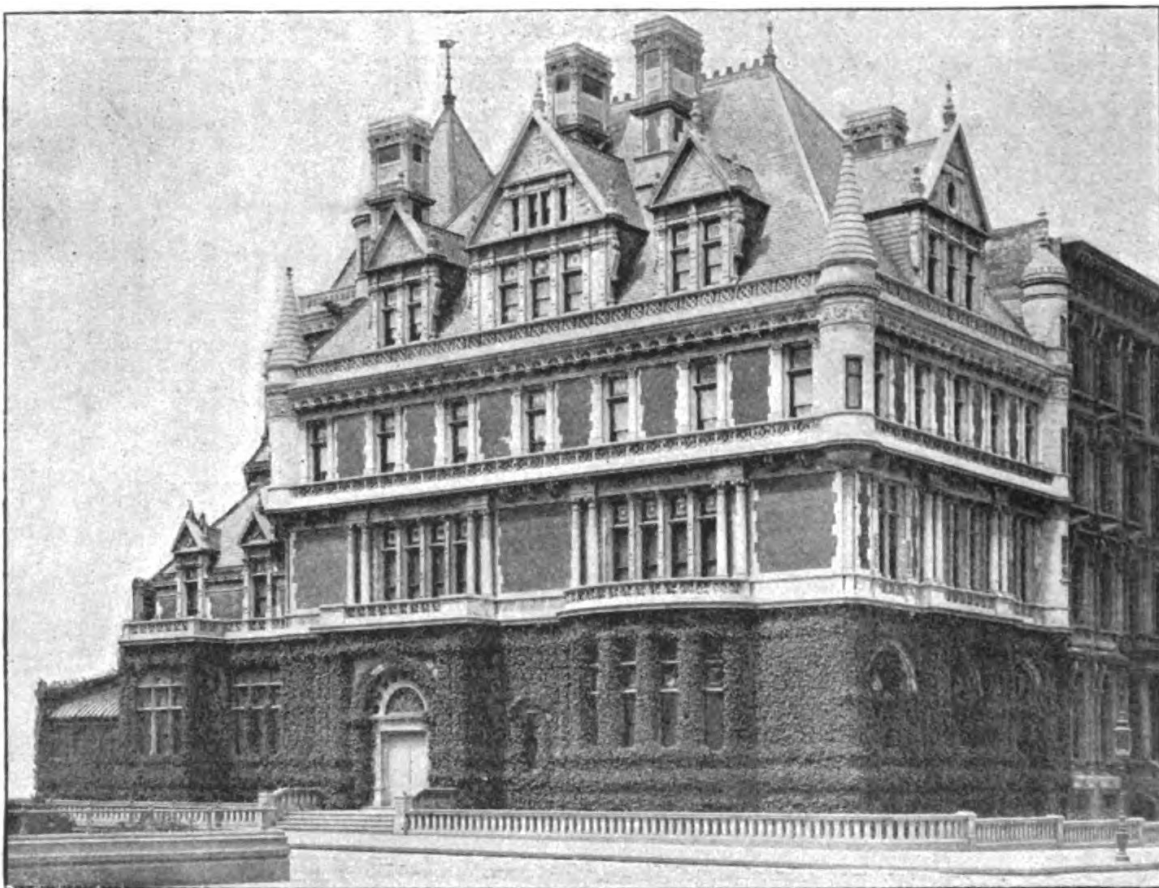


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tain sense, trustees for the people at large—though not in the sense insisted upon by the visionaries who, in their hostility to individual ownership, would destroy the foundations upon which society rests.

There is but one parallel to the marvelous inheritance of financial ability that has distinguished the Vanderbilt family. That one is to be found in the house of Rothschild, whose colossal fortune has had much longer to grow, and has been fostered by the support of most of the

crowned heads of Europe. In spite of these facts, the united wealth of all the branches of the Rothschild family is estimated at not more than half as much again as that of the four Vanderbilt brothers. The landed possessions of the Astors, preserved intact for four generations and augmented by the unearned increment of New York's development, hardly afford a parallel case. The rising generation of the Gould family has yet to prove its ability to manage a fortune which was pro-



CORNELIUS VANDERBILT'S RESIDENCE AT FIFTY SEVENTH STREET AND FIFTH AVENUE.

bably as great as Commodore Vanderbilt's at the time of the latter's death, but has since been far surpassed by the acquisitions of the Commodore's successors.

Seventy five years ago, as has already been stated, Mr. Cornelius Vanderbilt's grandfather and namesake was captain of a Staten Island sail boat. In 1817 he took the bold step of putting upon his route one of the new fangled vessels that went by steam. It paid him well, and the enterprising young man—he was then twenty three—branched out rapidly. He appeared on Wall Street with a scheme which took shape as the Nicaragua Transit Company. The capital of the concern was placed at the ambitious figure of \$4,000,000, to which the future railroad king apparently contributed little except his persuasive eloquence and his wonderful administrative ability. This latter talent was employed so effectually that the young financier, who acted

as president of the company, soon grew to an importance that dwarfed all his colleagues into utter insignificance. The enterprise was finally wound up with little profit to the stockholders; but the Commodore stepped from its ruins to more extensive ventures in the same line. During the rush to California his steamers divided with those of the Pacific Mail Company the traffic of the Isthmus route to the far Western gold fields. Others crossed the Atlantic, and at one time he had more than sixty vessels in commission.

But he was one of the first to foresee the coming subordination of steamboats to railroads, and to realize the immense possibilities of the latter system of transportation, which was then hardly out of its infancy. Gradually abandoning his marine interests, he sought a firm footing upon land by buying up the stock of the Harlem Railroad. Getting a controlling interest, he used his power to inflict merciless punishment upon

the Wall Street speculators who ventured to interfere with his plans, and to meddle with the securities of his road. From the comparatively insignificant Harlem, he went on to the New York Central, the nucleus of the far reaching highways of steel that are now known as "the Vanderbilt system of railroads."

When the Commodore died, in January, 1887, in his eighty third year, he left two sons. The younger, Cornelius Jeremiah, was the nearest approach to a black sheep among his numerous posterity. This statement must not be interpreted too severely, for together with utter lack of financial ability, "young Corneel" possessed many amiable traits of character, and retained to the last the friendship of some of the foremost of his contemporaries, notably Horace Greeley. His father, who regarded his peccadilloes with unrelenting severity, bequeathed him only the interest upon the sum of \$200,000. After other legacies amounting in all to about \$15,000,000, the remainder of the Commodore's accumulations were left to his other son, William H. Vanderbilt.

The man who thus, at the age of fifty six, inherited a fortune estimated at seventy five millions of dollars, was perhaps the most remarkable member of a remarkable family. He was born during his father's early days of comparative poverty, on Staten Island, and brought up there under a household regime of rigid strictness. For years after the Commodore became a power in the financial world, William H. lived the prosaic life of a plain Richmond County farmer, and the multiplication of the father's millions brought no luxury or ostentation to the homestead of the son. The Commodore had undoubtedly determined his choice of an heir and successor long before he gave his son any encouragement to count upon the prospect of great wealth. He tested the young man's capacity for railroad management by having him appointed receiver of a little bankrupt line on Staten Island. The

experiment was so successful that William was promoted to be Vice President of the Harlem road, a position in which he proved himself invaluable to his father and to the property. Thereafter he kept pace with every forward step of the Commodore and was a very important factor in building up the prosperity of his undertakings. As Vice President of the consolidated New York Central and Hudson River he performed an amount of work which, as some of his friends think, contributed to his death—a comparatively premature one in a family distinguished for longevity.

In many minds millions breed envy, and it is only natural that while William H. Vanderbilt's wonderful ability has been universally recognized, his personal qualities should have been misrepresented. Four hasty and injudicious words of his seem to have made a deeper impression upon the public mind than his many notable acts of generosity and public spirit. The circumstances under which that famous epigram, "the public be d——d!" was uttered, are thus narrated by Henry Clews, in his interesting volume of reminiscences, which has also been the authority for other facts cited in this article:

The subject [of Mr. Vanderbilt's interview with a Chicago newspaper reporter] was the fast mail train to Chicago. Mr. Vanderbilt was thinking of taking this train off because it did not pay.

"Why are you going to stop this fast mail train?" asked the reporter.

"Because it doesn't pay," replied Mr. Vanderbilt; "I can't run a train as far as this permanently at a loss."

"But the public find it very convenient and useful. You ought to accommodate them," rejoined the reporter.

"The public!" said Mr. Vanderbilt. "How do you know, or how can I know, that they want it? If they want it, why don't they patronize it and make it pay? That's the only test I have as to whether a thing is wanted or not. Does it pay? If it doesn't pay I suppose it isn't wanted."

"Are you working," persisted the reporter, "for the public or for your stockholders?"

"The public be damned!" exclaimed Mr. Vanderbilt. "I am working for my stockholders. If the public want the train why don't they support it?"

The expression, when placed in its real connection in the interview, does not imply any slur upon the public. It simply intimates that he was urging a thing on the public which it did not want and practically refused. The "cuss" word might have been left out, but the crushing reply to the reporter would not have been so emphatic, and that obtrusive representative of public opinion might have gone away unquenched.

William H. Vanderbilt never sought notoriety for his acts of munificence, but they were neither few nor small. He voluntarily paid to his brother Cornelius an annuity five times as large as that named by his father's will. He presented each of his sisters with half a million in United States bonds. He added \$300,000 to the million given by the Commodore to the Vanderbilt University at Nashville, Tennessee. He bore the expense of bringing the obelisk that now stands in Central Park from Alexandria to New York—which cost over \$100,000. He gave \$500,000 to the College of Physicians and Surgeons. His will distributed another million among various charities.

That will, which disposed of the greatest fortune ever yet bequeathed, was a remarkable document in more ways than one. It followed the Commodore's policy of maintaining the bulk of the family wealth practically intact and united, and at the same time it satisfied the participants in the distribution, and was commended as politic and equitable by public opinion. Ten million dollars and one of the Vanderbilt houses on Fifth Avenue were given to each of the testator's eight children. Then, after a long list of smaller legacies to relatives, friends, employees, and charitable and religious institutions, the residuary estate was equally divided between the two elder sons.

William H. Vanderbilt's family consisted of four sons—Cornelius, William Kissam, Frederick W., and George—and four daughters—Mrs. Elliott F. Shepard, Mrs. William Sloane, Mrs. H. McK. Twombly, and Mrs. W. S. Webb. All of them were—no doubt fortunately for themselves—born and brought up while

their father was a comparatively poor man, and in their childhood they knew little of the luxury of wealth. Never was there a better ordered household than the severely simple one where these eight children received a training that has been of inestimable value to them. Rarely has so large a family turned out so notably well. The four sons are, mentally and physically, excellent specimens of the American gentleman.

There is a saying that it takes three generations of wealth to make a gentleman. There is about as much truth in this as in some other accepted sayings. It is doubtful whether three generations of wealth do not unmake as many gentlemen as they make. Millionaires' sons and grandsons do not usually compare favorably, either in brain power or culture, with their fathers and grandfathers. We have all heard of the rich man who declined to let his son travel abroad, not because he objected to letting his boy see the world, but because he was unwilling to allow the world to see his boy. In the admirable manhood of Cornelius Vanderbilt and his brothers we see not the exemplification of a rule so much as an agreeable exception to the customary order of social evolution.

Cornelius Vanderbilt was forty years old when the sudden death of his father, on the 8th of December, 1885, raised him to the head of New York's greatest moneyed family. That headship is not merely an empty phrase, it may be remarked, for the wealth of the Vanderbilts, though not held in common as that of the Rothschilds is said to be, is yet kept together by strong bonds of family alliance, and is practically controlled as a unit by the elder brothers. Entering the world of business in his teens, as a clerk in the Shoe and Leather Bank, Cornelius was always, like his father, a hard worker. He left the bank to fulfill the duties of a subordinate position in the office of the New York Central, and worked his way up the

ladder until, at his father's death, he was ready to take the vacant place at the head of the management of his great railroad interests. To the duties that this position entails his attention has been unremitting. Not only does he deal with large questions of general policy, but he gives personal attention to details that many would consider trifling—for the reason that no one else can attend to them equally well.

There are few more public spirited men than Cornelius Vanderbilt. His charities, as well as his wife's, are numerous and unostentatious. He takes an especially deep interest in all movements for the benefit of boys and young men. Of the New York Young Men's Christian Association he is an active supporter, and its branches for railroad men are largely his own creation. He gives to these worthy institutions something more valuable than money contributions—he gives them a share of his time and his personal effort, and is a frequent attendant and speaker at their meetings. He also gave to the Metropolitan Museum of Art one of its finest and most valuable paintings—Rosa Bonheur's famous "Horse Fair."

Mr. Vanderbilt is a churchwarden of St. Bartholomew's, the handsome Episcopal house of worship on Madison Avenue. He succeeded to the office at the death of his father, who had held it for many years, and whose name is now graven on a bronze memorial tablet on the wall of the edifice. He is active in the work of the church, and a liberal and cheerful giver to the missions connected with it.

In his home life, too, Mr. Vanderbilt is most happily situated. He is a model husband and father, and is very fortunate in his family relations. He was married eighteen years ago to Miss Alice Gwinn of Cincinnati, and has four children. The eldest, who is named William H., after his grandfather, is a Yale student, and a very promising boy.

His New York residence, at the northwest corner of Fifth Avenue and Fifty Seventh Street, was built for him by his father, and is considered one of the handsomest houses in the country. Its well chosen pictures and extensive library show the cultured mind of its owner, whose tastes are as refined and intellectual as his habits are severely simple and unostentatious. Still, he is far from being an ascetic, and enjoys the good things of life, as he has a right to enjoy them. His cottage at Newport, The Breakers, is one of the finest of the summer capital's palaces. His holiday trips abroad are spent amid the social gayeties of Paris and London or the art treasures of the historical cities of Italy.

None of the Vanderbilt brothers is actively interested in the speculations of Wall Street. Great as is the power they might yield in the battle of bulls and bears, they prefer, wisely indeed, to stand aloof from the fray and to devote themselves to the management of their vast and substantial property. It is fortunate for the public that their great moneyed possessions are in hands where they have been proved to be a benefit and not a menace to the body politic.

